

Business and industry

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'More than half our clientele are regulars, some who come here every day, every week or two or three times a week; they feel comfortable here.'

PATRICIA JOHNSON, owner of Duxbury's Milepost Tavern Restaurant with her husband, Bob



Patricia and Bud Johnson in the bar area of the Milepost Tavern Restaurant that they've run for 23 years.

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/TOM HERDE

Serving the public's taste

Hospitality a key ingredient in Milepost Tavern's success

By Laurence Collins
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

DUXBURY — At a time when more people settle for cookie-cutter chain eateries or are lured to here-today, gone-in-a-year-or-so theme restaurants, a local stick-to-the-ribs establishment has been thriving for almost a quarter of a century.

Sitting along Route 3A in this bucolic seaside community, the Milepost Tavern Restaurant has captured the longtime allegiance of patrons from across the South Shore. Proprietors Bud and Patricia Johnson (better known as Trish) will mark their 23d year at the site in November.

But the restaurant wasn't always so popular.

"It started out as a hot dog and ice cream stand in the '30s, Ma Pierce's, then later on it became a roadhouse bar — a little food, steak and hamburgers, that sort of thing, but mostly the booze," said Bud.

Today, the Milepost has more of a genteel English country pub feel about it than that of a roadhouse, but without the calculated brass, mullioned and wainscoted ersatz pub look fashioned by restaurant designers. The interior has evolved over the years in a way that doesn't call attention to itself. With a cozy dining room with fireplace, dark wood booths and tables, an ell that holds the tavern bar (a small TV but no Keno) and some smaller pub tables, it creates a relaxing atmosphere that reflects a flair for hospitality.

"More than half our clientele are

regulars, some who come here every day, every week or two or three times a week; they feel comfortable here," said Trish. "I've heard customers wave people off of certain seats jokingly with, 'Hey, you can't sit there, that's where Joe sits,' that sort of thing."

First-time visitors can easily spot the friendly familiarity the restaurant breeds. Conversations frequently are carried on table to table, or from one end of the bar to the other. (A now-notorious brief Internet review of the restaurant by a first-time visitor named Sue observed, "If you don't live in Duxbury or wear a sweater tied around your neck, get ready to be ignored.")

"I remember that review," Trish said, laughing. "It was way off base."

The wait staff reflects the couple's dedication to constancy and consistency. With a staff of some 35 to 40, including five cooks and several managers, employment tenures ranging from 10 to 20 years are commonplace.

Consistency, especially in the kitchen, has always been a top priority of the Johnsons.

"That was the key, consistency in the kitchen," said Bud. "We're absolutely focused on the kitchen. All the other things we left for later. It takes a long time to get a regular customer; it takes only one bad meal to drive him away."

The Milepost menu in both the tavern and the dining room is New England traditional, with a wide range of meat, seafood and poultry dishes, and a generous selection of daily

specials. A formidable wine list is also available.

Like many brave souls who venture into the restaurant arena, Bud and Trish Johnson's prior experience in the field was virtually nil, save for Trish's four years of waitressing while attending college. But with a management degree from Colby College and 25 years of management experience in state and local government, Bud was confident they could pull it off.

"We took a second mortgage out on the house, used my state and municipal retirement money, and invested every nickel we could find to purchase the Milepost," Bud recalled. "Then we worked long hours seven days a week to get it off the ground."

Trish recalled a scary revelation following several days of closing negotiations with the bank: "When we finally got everything settled with the bank, we decided to go to our very own restaurant and have dinner to celebrate. While we were sitting there, one of the waitresses came up to me and said, 'There's no toilet paper in the ladies room.' We had to deal with things like that for years."

Not any more, though, Bud said.

"The key is to delegate, to give good people authority along with responsibility," he said.

"Today, we don't work those long hours. We're able to live a normal life. We can leave for days and be assured that the place is being properly run."

And he means it — the Johnsons are taking a monthlong cross-country tour in their new luxury van.